

Early Moral Agency, Emotion Understanding, and Mother-Child Discourse

Ross A. Thompson, Abby C. Winer,
Emily K. Newton, and Miranda Goodman

University of California, Davis

Early moral development is based on emotional understanding as well as behavioral standards

- Emotion is a child's first entrée into another person's internal experience
- Emotions are also important to children's self-awareness, including the development of the "moral self"
- Early adult-child discourse contributes to children's understanding of the meaning and causes of others' feelings
- Parent-child conversations are also important to connecting children's emotional sensitivity to behavioral standards – humanizing moral expectations in the context of moral evaluatives
- This has important implications for understanding moral development

2 ½ years: Mother-child conversation elements during conflict episodes in the lab

Talking about rules

Talking about the consequences of actions

Talking about people's emotions

Moral evaluative statements ("good girl!")

Compromising or bargaining

Justification and reasoning /
Low use of threats, teasing or insistence



Conscience
Development
age 3

Early Social Understanding Study -- Toddlers

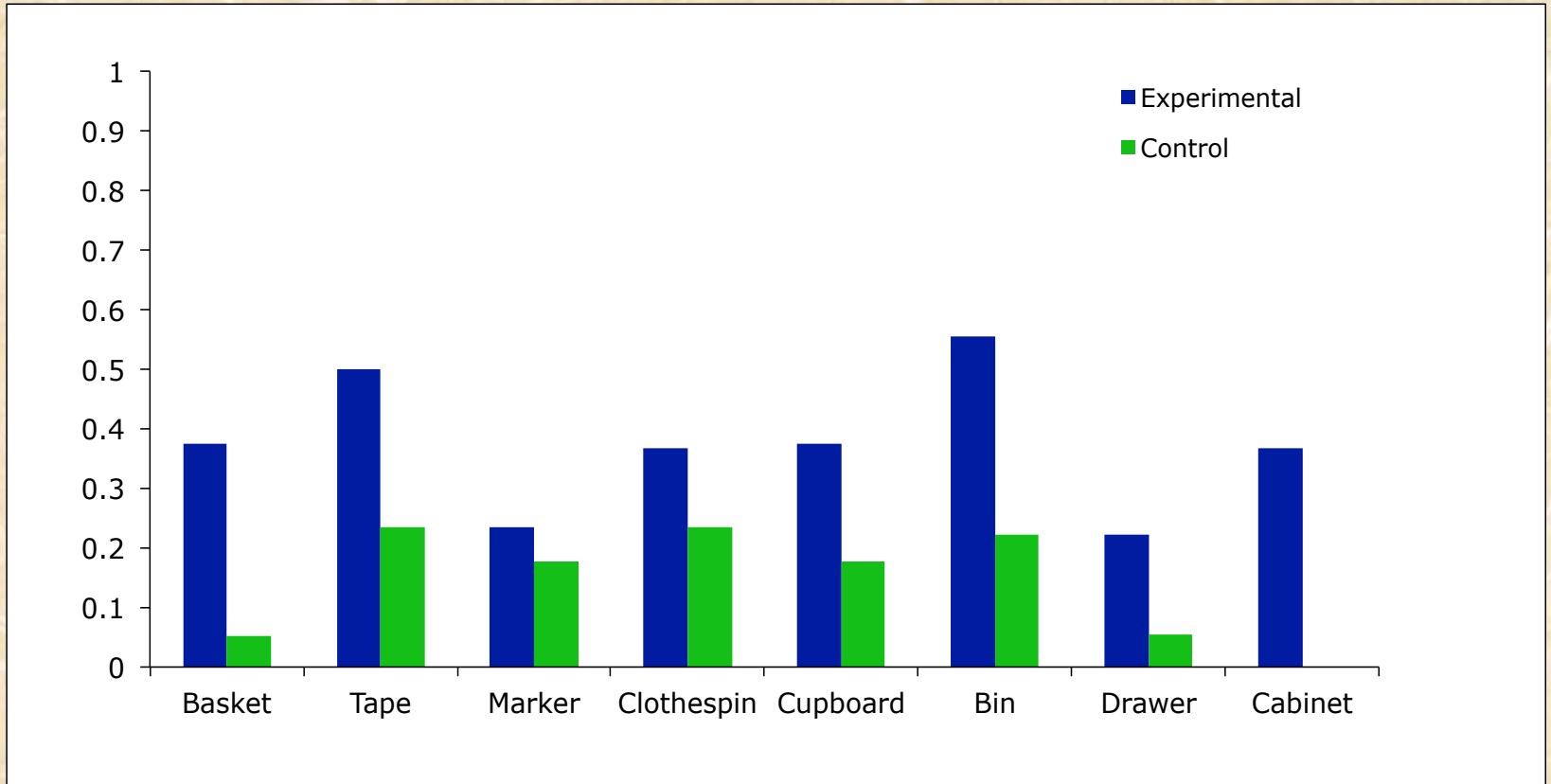
36 18-month-olds participated in a series of 8 helping tasks that varied systematically by the experimenter's indication of need and the experimenter's facial expression of emotion in a 2x2 design, with two tasks per condition

Example: The experimenter tries to put her book into a basket. She knocks it to the floor and reaches for it (experimental condition) or places the basket on the floor without reaching (control condition). In each condition, she either looks sad or neutral.



Mothers were present but occupied throughout. No thanks or other rewards were offered by the experimenter for the toddler's help.

Toddler Helping in Experimental and Control Conditions



Predictors of toddler's prosocial behavior . . .

- **Toddler emotion language**: the Internal State Language Questionnaire (modified from Bretherton & Beeghly, 1982) assesses toddlers' use of words associated with emotion via parental report.
- **Maternal positive regard**: coded from the maternal mind-mindedness interview (Meins et al., 2003), in which the mother responds to the question, "Can you describe [child's name] to me?". Number of positive emotional terms used to describe the child (e.g., "She's such a happy child.") (after Demers et al., 2010).

Predicting toddler helping behavior in sad and neutral conditions

Variable	Sad			Neutral		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β
Toddler emotion language	.23	.12	.33*	-.07	.13	-.09
Maternal positive regard	1.89	.82	.37*	.11	.93	.02
<i>R</i> ²		.22			.01	
<i>F for change in R</i> ²		4.28*			.15	

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

Preschoolers' Emotional Responding & Communication Study

60 preschoolers age 4½ and their mothers participated in a lab session involving prosocial tasks for the child (with mother absent), several mother-child conversations, and assessments of the child's emotion understanding and attributions concerning other people's needs and intentions



Prosocial tasks

- **Markers:** Experimenter trips and spills a tub of markers, and child can help pick them up
- **Snack:** Experimenter and child have a snack, but experimenter is given few crackers, and child, who has more, can share
- **Balloon:** Experimenter and child decorate their balloons, but the experimenter's balloon pops, and child can share their balloon

Mother-Child Conversations about Helping

Mothers were asked to talk with their children about (a) a recent experience when the child had helped another person or was nice to them, and (b) a recent experience when the child could have helped or done something nice, but did not.

These reminiscing conversations were recorded, transcribed, and subsequently coded for a variety of conversational themes, for both mother and child, based on past research on conversation and sociomoral and emotional understanding.

Maternal conversational elements in discussing helping:

- Positive moral evaluatives (“That was a nice thing to do”)
- Comments on needs & desires that motivate helping (“She really couldn’ t finish it all by herself”)
- References to positive *moral* emotions (“I was so proud of you!”)
- References to positive emotions (“It made Sissy happy when you picked up the mess with her”)
- Comments about the positive consequences of helping (“We had time to go to the park because of what you did”)

Maternal conversational elements in discussing not helping:

- Negative moral evaluatives (“You were not very nice then”)
- References to negative emotions (“Laura was sad that she had to carry everything in all by herself”)
- Comments on needs & desires that motivate helping (“I really needed help because my hands were full”)
- Comments on needs & desires that *inhibit* helping (“I could tell that you really didn’t want to stop watching your TV show to come help her”)
- Positive moral evaluatives (“It would have been great if you had shared”)

Other findings . . .

- Maternal **rule-based justifications** (i.e., references to moral / social conventional / family rules) were *very infrequent* in conversations about helping and not helping
- Mothers frequently discussed **constructive incentives** for helping even in conversations about not helping, such as positive emotions or positive consequences that might have derived from the assistance that was not provided
- Although mothers discussed **negative moral emotions** (such as being ashamed or “sorry”) less frequently than they discussed positive moral emotions (such as pride), their discussion of negative moral emotions was **significantly positively associated with children’s helping** across all three tasks

Final thoughts

- Early moral agency is built on **emotion understanding** as it is scaffolded through parent-child conversation about admirable and disapproved conduct
- **Different conversational elements** may be important in different conversational contexts, with moral evaluatives, moral emotions, justifications, and consequentialist discourse having different functions in conversations about misbehavior, prosocial behavior, and other morally-relevant activity
- Parent-child conversation is important also for **relational incentives for moral agency**, reflected in the use of positive and negative moral evaluatives, and the importance of maternal positive regard for very young children

Thanks!

Ross Thompson
rathompson@ucdavis.edu